

COMMUNICATIVE RELATIONSHIPS IN HYBRID LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS SAFEGUARDING AN ETHICAL SPACE AND CULTIVATING HUMANIZING CONTEXTS

RELAZIONI COMUNICATIVE IN AMBIENTI DI APPRENDIMENTO IBRIDI SALVAGUARDARE UNO SPAZIO ETICO E COLTIVARE CONTESTI UMANIZZANTI

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Abstract

This essay is a pedagogical reflection on the *value of education* as a *communicative process*, rooted in an ethics of educational language, in respect of the ontological dignity of the interlocutors. This in light of ICT (*Information and Communications Technology*), which have a clear educational power and which give rise to hybrid communicative contexts, within which it is necessary to operate with an ethical, as well as digital, awareness and competence.

By tracing an *ethics of communicative relations*, the article focuses on the possibility to consider the new operational teaching tools for the contribution they can offer to the construction of the *human*. This viewpoint recalls the need to ethically inhabit hybrid learning environments, increasing the person's ability to reflect and make decisions even *with respect to* the virtual world, as well as choosing *good relationships*, capable of reaffirming and safeguarding the relational structure of the human being. The heuristic-hermeneutic perspective assumed traces insights that are useful for supporting the being in formation, so that he may also be guided *in* the virtual world and regain, or not lose, the uniquely human ability to be a *moral individual*. There is a clear pedagogical-educational requirement: to realize an *educational environment* that is truly a *humanizing life context*, that is, a *place* where a person can discover his *own humanity* through the encounter with *the humanity of others*.

Questo saggio è una riflessione pedagogica sul valore dell'educazione come processo comunicativo, radicato in un'etica del linguaggio educativo, nel rispetto della dignità ontologica degli interlocutori. Ciò alla luce delle ICT (*Information and Communications Technology*), che hanno un chiaro potere educativo e che danno vita a contesti comunicativi ibridi, all'interno dei quali è necessario operare con consapevolezza e competenza etica, oltre che digitale.

Tracciando un'etica delle relazioni comunicative, l'articolo pone l'accento sulla possibilità di considerare i nuovi strumenti didattici operativi per il contributo che possono offrire alla costruzione dell'umano. Questo punto di vista richiama la necessità di abitare eticamente ambienti di apprendimento ibridi, accrescendo la capacità di riflessione e di decisione della persona anche rispetto al mondo virtuale, nonché scegliendo buone relazioni, capaci di riaffermare e salvaguardare la struttura relazionale dell'essere umano. La prospettiva euristico-ermeneutica assunta traccia intuizioni utili a sostenere l'essere in formazione, affinché possa essere guidato anche nel mondo virtuale e riguadagnare, o non perdere, la capacità unicamente umana di essere un individuo morale. C'è una chiara esigenza pedagogico-educativa: realizzare un ambiente educativo che sia veramente un contesto di vita umanizzante, cioè un luogo in cui una persona possa scoprire la propria umanità attraverso l'incontro con l'umanità degli altri.

Keywords

Educational communication; hybrid learning environments; ethics of communicative relationships; humanizing educational contexts.
Comunicazione educativa; ambienti di apprendimento ibridi; etica delle relazioni comunicative; umanizzare i contesti educativi.

Introduction – Pedagogy and the ethics of educational language

Due to its epistemological nature, pedagogy is linked to concrete reality; it cannot be separated from the fact of reality. In the field of pedagogy, this means that there is constant focus on phenomenal data, which also and above all animates the planning stage. In fact, pedagogy elaborates plans while taking into account the facts and their repercussions on human reality. We need only think of the pandemic situation (relating to the recent past, as well as the present), which has prompted and is prompting the educating community to reflect on possible changes and to offer contributions to the construction of the future. Therefore, the utopian element, typical of pedagogical science, also emerges. It is specified as the human capacity to look *beyond contingent data*, to think about change and take on challenges by dealing with the unknown (Pati, 2021, pp. 13-14). According to Arendt, a «crisi ci costringe a tornare alle domande: esige da noi risposte nuove o vecchie, purché siano scaturite da un esame diretto, e si trasforma in una catastrofe solo quando noi cerchiamo di farvi fronte con [...] pregiudizi, aggravandola e per di più rinunciando a vivere quell'esperienza della realtà, a utilizzare quell'occasione per riflettere, che la crisi stessa costituisce» (1991, p. 229). The unexpected event of the pandemic (which provided the opportunity to experiment with learning models other than “face-to-face” ones) therefore invites us to meditate, to question ourselves in every area of social life.

In light of this premise and the attractions resulting from new technologies, in the contemporary age of *polycentric communication* (Tempesta, 2021, p. 48), there is an increasing need to reflect pedagogically on the *value of education* as an *interpersonal process*, as an *ethical-communicative process* that needs to be valued. The new operational teaching tools are definitely aids that the educational communicative relationship can certainly use. We must keep in mind, however, that with regard to their use, they need to be considered above all for the contribution they can offer to the construction of the *human*. To this end, it would be appropriate to recover the language of ethics, in order to assist in the affirmation of the *ethics of educational language*. This means that useful indications can arise from moral principles, so that (numerical and analogical) communication may take place in full respect of the *ontological dignity* of the interlocutors. *Communicative action* (Habermas, 1997, 2009) needs to be directed. It is necessary to bring out an *ethics of speech* (Apel, 1992, pp. 28-30, 1997), or rather certain criteria according to which both *those who communicate* and *those who benefit from communication* make certain choices.

1 For an *ethics of communicative relationships*

In modern times, *communication* is no longer understood as a mere activity performed by human beings and, in part, by artificial entities, but it becomes the *very environment* in which the individual acts and interacts. This is made possible by constantly evolving technologies. Hence the pedagogical-educational request to examine the *communicative environment*, and subsequently ask ourselves *how to act* within it and specify *what* it means to *act well*.

It is known that in the transition from a linear, mathematical/cybernetic model (Shannon & Weaver, 1963) to the modern theory of communication (Watzlawick, Beavin & Jackson, 1967), the meaning of *communicative action* changes. Communication is no longer considered a mere transmission of data/information from the sender to the recipient, but it is understood as a *relationship*. Even the great rhetoricians of the ancient world, such as Cicero (2007), pointed out that *communicating* is different from simply *informing*: Quintilian (2007) often uses the term *communicatio* to refer to *participatory communication*. We refer to a type of communication which requires the active participation and involvement of both the *speaker* and the *listener*. This use is linked to the tradition of rhetorical thought, developed by Aristotle (2014, I, 1358 a, 37 b 2). Communicating, therefore, means opening up and creating a *common space* between the interlocutors, as Émile Benveniste also points out (2001, vol. 1, p. 71). He emphasizes that communicating (*communico*) derives from *cum munus*, ‘to make common’, ‘to share’, ‘to agree’. Communicating, then, is an action placed at the foundation of a community (*communitas*), which expresses the possibility of making something a common possession (*communis*). Consequently, it has profound ethical-political value. What is common are the *munia* (or *munera*): the gifts that members of the same community

exchange with confidence, to strengthen their relationships. Among these gifts there is precisely the word, the *logos*, or more generally the act of communication; the capacity of speech which, according to Aristotle (2016, I, 1253 a, 9-10), is uniquely human.

In the contemporary world, information and communication technologies affect the daily environment, increasing the possibilities of communication and giving rise to a multitude of communicative contexts, which include *offline* and *online* environments, within which it is necessary to operate with awareness and competence. In this way, a new shared space is created on a global level, involving people virtually connected to each other from all over, as well as artificial communicative agents. Therefore, today the ancient idea of *communicating as sharing a common space* seems to be reappearing, this time, however, on a virtual level.

Given that in the modern age we have the experience of living in as many worlds as possible, or in a multitude of *offline* and *online* environments, with the risk that the individual may overlap and exchange them with each other (to the point of confusing what is true with what is false), there is a pedagogical-educational request to ethically direct human action within each of these contexts. It should be considered, in fact, that the *munus* of communicating has a great “power” to affect, for better or worse, the formation and action of otherness, depending on whether it is rooted in a *truthful* or *untruthful logos*. This aspect was already skilfully pointed out in ancient times by the sophist Gorgias in the *Encomio di Elena* (2007), by Plato, through the famous metaphor of the merchant in the *Protagora* (2007, 314 a-b), and also by Plutarch in his work *Per un parlare efficace* (2008). Therefore, we are responsible for the good or bad consequences of using communication. This occurs because communicating is a *way of acting*. Like any action, *communicative action* (in person and/or online) can be performed well or badly; it can be fair or unfair. This refers both to the *intentions* that motivate it and to the *consequences* it involves.

It is the task of ethics to reflect on these aspects, as ethics studies the criteria and principles of action. In particular, applied ethics (which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century) attempt to answer real questions, determined by technological developments and their concrete consequences, which are inherent in human choices and behaviour. Among these (in addition to social ethics, bioethics, environmental ethics and economic ethics) there is the *ethics of communication* (Cohen & Wellman, 2014), aimed at examining and getting a deeper understanding of the impact of technologies on various dimensions of human existence.

In order to develop an *ethics of communicative relationships*, even virtual ones, it would be appropriate to promote within the individual the recognition of the difference between what they experience daily both *offline* and *online*. This is because these two dimensions can often and easily be confused with each other. In addition, each individual should be helped to find, within the real/virtual world, various levels of interaction. Communication, indeed, takes place on many levels: it can be intimate and personal or public and large-scale.

The foregoing requires increasing man’s (and especially young people’s) *ability to reflect and make decisions* even *with respect to* the virtual world and its all-encompassing and attractive dimension, which at times seems to leave no room for exercising a free choice. This heuristic-hermeneutic perspective also requires supporting the individual, so that he may also be guided *in* the virtual world in order to regain, or in any case not lose, the uniquely human ability to be a *moral individual*. And this occurs when he has the experience of being able to decide with regard to reality, even a virtual reality, by which he may be absorbed.

In this regard, we should not underestimate the distinction between ethics *in* the virtual world and ethics *of* the virtual world (Cavalier, 2005), just as we should not overlook an essential prerequisite which makes ethics possible: human beings are called to establish themselves as *free individuals*, meaning that they can choose to behave well or badly in person/online. Therefore, it is the individual himself who decides and becomes responsible both for the ways in which he interacts with real/virtual/hybrid environments and for the decisions he has made. What is at stake, therefore, is the *responsibility* to which each person is called (Silverstone, 2008; Padula, 2012, pp. 109-122).

It is easy to understand how this issue takes on particular relevance in reference to minors, who often play the dual role of *network users* (potentially exposed to the vision of “dangerous” sites) or the “*subject*” of *potential improper practices* carried out on the Internet (enticement, *cyberbullying*, etc.). In these situations, in order to remind the young person of his sense of individual responsibility, it is customary to resort to rules (useful in guiding him to a proper and responsible use of the Internet) and monitoring measures, implemented by the sites or organizations in charge of this purpose. This issue, which challenges the topic of education, certainly becomes increasingly complex and extremely topical, since it calls into question not only the transformation of the *idea of the Internet community* but above all the *formation of personal identity*, since there is also the danger of the uniformity and depersonalization of the members of the community.

2 Ethically inhabiting hybrid learning environments

These considerations invite us to reflect on *how* we can establish a proper relationship between the various *offline* and *online* contexts, within which the individual (ontological, axiological and relational structure) is living and interacting. The technological environments (which concern daily life, increasing the human possibilities for action and allowing access to a virtual dimension) open up to the individual through a multitude of communicative devices. In these contexts, the individual is called to ethically manage the choices he has made. In this respect, it can be argued that the being in formation establishes a *complex relationship* with technological devices. The latter, in fact, does not only imply the ability to be able to use the devices, but also requires the knowledge of the purposes and consequences associated with this use; that is, it requires an *ethical competence*. All this raises meaningful questions, which can be summarized in the following question: *how can man establish himself as a moral individual, while living in environments that are increasingly independent of his intervention/control?*

To reaffirm and safeguard (in communicative environments dominated by technological devices) the *relational structure* of man, to ensure that he may continue to be what he is ontologically, it is necessary to choose *good relationships*, which are able to promote and realize *new qualitatively relevant relationships* (Fabris, 2018, p. 119). In this regard, Dewey's *experimental continuum* comes to mind (Dewey, 2014, pp. 19-37), which invites the educator, during the path of human perfectibility, to encourage quality educational experiences: those capable of leading to further experiences. It is likely that we can recognize here a basic principle, according to which the person is able to be guided in existential *circunstancias* (Ortega y Gasset, 2014, p. 39), within hybrid learning environments (Bertagna, 2020, pp. 156-158), in increasingly technological communicative contexts which sometimes do not require human intervention to work. Therefore, the educational question refers to the need to preserve and give life to an *ethical space* for human action/interaction, especially in the modern age, because the technologies themselves are also acting. All without forgetting, in light of the teachings of Buber (Buber, 1997, pp. 79, 91) and Stein (Stein, 1985, pp. 58, 64) that authentic (as well as empathetic) relationships are possible only between distinct identities, called to remain “different”, not to blend together in the *intersubjective space*, but rather to preserve each their own individuality, guaranteeing the maintenance of a *healthy distance*. In this regard, it is necessary to ask again: *what does a human being's responsibility consist of and how is it exercised?* He freely assumes responsibility for the *relationships* he initiates, for the *criteria* on which these relationships are built, and for the *relational context* itself. Human beings (unlike machines) can do this even though this environment does not depend on him, he does not have full control over it, he finds it has already been initiated by the actions of other natural or artificial subjects. For man, this is what the implementation of his freedom and the reaffirmation of the specific nature of being a *moral individual* consists in.

ICT (*Information and Communications Technology*) certainly contribute to building learning environments; they are an integral part of “classical” educational contexts (family, school, etc.), as they condition their communicative action, as well as educational practice. According to Aroldi, digital media «costituiscono sempre più significativamente un nuovo ambiente vitale da abita insieme: [...] sono [...] luoghi in stretta continuità con quelli fisici frequentati quotidianamente, nei quali dare continuità e sostegno a relazioni, interazioni e forme di associazione che articolano la vita offline» (2012, p. 9). Indeed, in

recent years the distinction between *offline* and *online* has gradually weakened: digital environments and other contexts of human existence have gradually become more and more intertwined. With the aim of expressing the pervasiveness of new technologies, Floridi (2017) recovers the term *infosphere*, to indicate an increasingly digital and interconnected environment, which represents the very *habitat* of human beings. Rivoltella also sheds light on the *media* as the *connective tissue* of contemporary living, both on an individual and social level: «I media sono oggi per noi e per le nostre società come una pelle [...]. I media ci ‘attraversano’, come suggerisce Luciano Galliano, [...] grande esperto dei media. Nel bene e nel male. E i sistemi e i servizi educativi non possono far finta di non saperlo» (2018, p. 98).

The new technologies, therefore, have a clear educational power, even though it must also be acknowledged that educational intentionality is linked to the choices made by *those who regulate them and those who use them*. It can therefore be asserted that ICT have an impact on education *tout court*, on the way of perceiving and building knowledge, on the construction of social bonds (Rivoltella, 2011, pp. 107-119; Bencivenga, 2020), as well as on human customs and habits, namely, on the *ethos*, going back to its etymology (in accordance with the Socratic *ti esti*), whose Aristotelian meaning can be recovered to interpret *ethics* as a *habitual place*, the *common home of humanity* (Aristotle, 1999).

3 Cultivating humanizing educational contexts

What is the ultimate meaning of a context, which allows it to be pedagogically qualified? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to start from an assumption: the *connection* is not in itself a *relationship*, a *communicative relationship*. *Being connected* does not always coincide with *being in relationship*. This is because new technologies facilitate the sharing of views, but can also lead the individual towards self-referencing. That is to say, there may be the danger of self-referencing, which exposes the person to the risk of missing the authentic encounter with the other. ICT help to enrich expressive forms, to enhance the sharing of spaces/times/languages, to build, in other words, better connected environments, but not for this reason are they more humanizing. In order for them to be so, the objective that must be pursued and achieved is to make these educational environments *personalized* (Triani, 2021, pp. 43-44), that is, *truly educational places*, capable of contributing to personal growth, given that they are tailored to each being in formation.

In the light of these considerations, it is necessary to meditate on *how* to build truly humanizing educational contexts. Being limited to the claim that it is sufficient to ensure moral weight to the educational relationship would cause us to fall into a *rigid axiological ontologism*, which aims only to impose values to be learned (Broccoli, 2017, 2021). On the contrary, the aim is to point out heuristic paths to follow, without however claiming to provide solutions or close once and for all the discussion on education, which is aporetic in itself. Therefore, in the light of the well-known Kantian questions (Kant, 1971, vol. 2, p. 612), one may ask: *what can education, understood as paideia and Bildung, know, do and hope for in a reasonable way?* Educational action, indicating only one dimension of a broader and more complex system, which is both ethical and political (as well as formative), must be rooted in the *centrality of the person*. This means putting into practice an education that aims for the unity of the individual, the encounter with otherness, the development of critical thinking and conscious participation. By assuming this point of view, without neglecting the *new media* within educational planning (as they may contribute to the promotion of the involvement - Rivoltella, 2018, p. 8), the need arises to look after the *style* and *quality* of communication (Spina, 2018), also online, through reference to a responsible use of expressive forms. This method of proceeding (rooted in the interest relating to the various dimensions of the individual) can encourage the minor to acquire relational and social skills; it can value an education aimed at the *development of the human*, always keeping in mind that the exercise of the *paideia* requires ongoing construction of one's freedom and ongoing questioning. One of the tasks of the teacher-educator, as a *change maker*, is therefore to propose and implement an *education to hermeneutic listening and to the authentic word*, as a fundamental element of the *paideia*. This is also necessary in order to develop both ethical and digital competence, useful in order to enhance everyone's ability to use new technologies in a critical and creative way.

In conclusion, an *educational environment* can be *pedagogically qualified* when it becomes a *humanizing life context*, or when it allows the person to discover *his own humanity* through an encounter with the *humanity of others*. The widespread nature of *community technologies* (Rivoltella, 2017) has made the universality of these educational challenges even more evident. By recognizing the *value* of not separating technology from pedagogy, and by realizing that it is not the *media* that “determine” the educational value of an environment, even though they may contribute to making it a humanizing context, pedagogical attention must be directed to *if* and *how* educational practice can be concretely oriented towards an ethical-communicative exchange. If the purpose of educational action is that of *meaningful and critical learning*, such action can only take place within the context of a *profound human relationship* (Tempesta, 2021, p. 49). The direction to follow, therefore, is that of an *ethical and ontological re-establishment of the discussion on education and formative communication*, which needs to be realized in all learning environments (real/virtual/hybrid), due to the fact that ethics constitute the unquestionable foundation for building an educational plan, which can be described as authentic and effective.

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